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HOW THEN *COULD* WE LIVE?
TOWARDS THE PRAGMATIC CREATION OF
SUSTAINABLE ECOLOGICAL HABITUS IN CITIES

**A dissertation presented in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of**

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You see things; and you say ‘Why?’

But I dream things that never were; and I say, ‘Why not?’

—George Barnard Shaw, *Back to Methuselah*

ABSTRACT

Creating ecologically sustainable ways of life is desirable, necessary, and urgent for the collective future of life on Earth. Although this is acknowledged, aspired to, and increasingly pursued in action, broad-scale sustainability remains unrealised. Western cities offer a strategic place to exemplify and accelerate global sustainability transitions. Such cities are characterised by dense human populations with excessive per capita resource use, but they can also be cornucopias of economic development, progressive politics, and diverse culture and correspondingly act at global hotspots of innovation and change.

This exploratory research proposes pragmatic backcasted pathways for furthering such change, constructing future visions of more sustainable ways of life in Western cities, identifying present-day barriers to realising these, and generating practical solutions ‘here and now’ that could contribute strategically to overcoming the barriers, towards a sustainable future. An insight and foresight rich distillation of evidence-based knowledge and practical experience was generated to inform these pathways, through qualitative interviews with 25 esteemed experts specialising in fields of socio-ecology and cities, including planning, design, sociology, psychology, philosophy, art, activism, economics, and government.

To analyse this data and conceptualise alternative pathways, ‘ecological habitus’, an emergent socio-ecological theory, was developed and employed as a practical framework for conceptually linking broad-scale socio-ecological issues with everyday practice; analysing the inter-dependent variables (e.g. normative, material, social, and psychological) of social reproduction and change; and assessing their sustainability at different scales (e.g. individual and institutional). Two components were added to the theory: ‘natural capital’ (the ecological/biophysical factors within socio-ecological relationships), and ‘ecological reflexivity’ (people’s responses to natural capital whether intentional-critical, periodic-conscious, or routine-subconscious). These enhance ecological habitus as a versatile tool for socio-ecological and sustainability-transition research.

The ultimate research outcomes are three backcasted pathways towards a future of ‘sustainable ecological habitus’, which could begin pragmatically with: collaborative practice among city authorities to develop as ecologically-reflexive sustainability leaders and overcome disciplinary silos; strategic enrichment of cities with accessible, place-based natural capital to enhance human-nature connection; and everyday self-, or socially-directed sustainability micro-interventions among city-dwellers, to incrementally grow mainstream sustainable ecological habitus. These actions combined could accelerate sustainable ecological habitus in Western cities and beyond. The power is ours.

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